



United States Newspaper Research: News You Can Use

Jason B. Harrison

FamilySearch
harrisonjb@familysearch.org

Newspapers are an indispensable source of genealogical information. They often contain clues, insights, and information not found elsewhere. They may even provide answers to our most puzzling research problems. Yet, despite all their potential, newspapers are often underutilized by researchers. Why? Some of the challenges include figuring out what newspapers were in circulation at a particular place and time, locating existing papers today, accessing far away materials, and lack of every name indexes. This class will address those challenges and provide a general overview of newspaper research with an introduction to a number of online resources.

THE VALUE OF NEWSPAPERS

Genealogists use newspapers in their research for a variety reasons; most often as a substitute for nonexistent, missing, or incomplete vital records. The information may be found in the form of a birth, marriage, death (obituary), or funeral notice. There may also be listings of birthdays, engagements, marriage licenses, weddings, anniversaries, coroner reports, burial permits, etc.

However, newspapers are more than vital record substitutes. They may contain a wealth of information of interest to the genealogist including biographical sketches, photographs, lists of passengers, citizenship notices, land transactions, legal notices, tax lists, military news, records of slaves, social pages, weather data, etc. If nothing more, they provide great historical context.

As with other records, genealogists must exercise caution when working with newspapers. Just because it's in print doesn't mean it's factual. Remember, reports were not always published immediately after an event occurred. Writers and editors may have had hidden motives or biases. People's memories fade over time—specific facts and details are forgotten, and stories are easily embellished. Always try to verify details found in newspapers with primary source documentation. Also, be prepared for some unexpected findings (good or bad).

WHAT NEWSPAPERS EXISTED?

Thousands of newspapers have been published over the last three hundred years. These include national, local, ethnic, foreign-language, military, political, religious, and student or university newspapers. Many were published on a daily basis; others were circulated as either weekly or monthly editions. Today, many newspapers are available as an online edition. To learn what newspapers existed at a particular place and time researchers may want to:

Search:

- Local and county histories
- City directories
- Printed sources^{1 2 3}
- Internet
- Library of Congress: U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690 – Present⁴
- Google

Contact:

- Libraries or archives
- Genealogical or historical societies

Resources

- ¹ Brigham, Clarence Saunders. *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2 vols. Hamden, Connecticut: Shoe String Press, 1962. This reference work is arranged geographically by state and city. Each bibliographic entry consists of newspaper title, names of publishers, dates of publication, and changes in title. Each citation is followed by a listing of the major repositories and includes a description of holdings.
- ² Gregory, Winifred ed. *American Newspapers 1821-1936: A Union List of Files Available in the United States and Canada*. New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1937. This resource picks up where Brigham's book left off, covering the years 1821 to 1936. Each entry is arranged geographically by state and city and consists of newspaper title, publication dates, frequency of publication, major repositories and their collection details.
- ³ Mallegg, Kristen B. Ed. *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media: An Annual Guide to Newspapers, Magazines, Journals, and Related Publications*. Detroit, Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2010. The directory contains information about current newspapers including title of newspaper, publisher, type of newspaper, when founded, frequency of publication, subscription rates, and contact information.
- ⁴ Library of Congress: Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. This website has an excellent resource entitled "US Newspaper Directory, 1690 – Present." The directory currently lists over 140,000 newspaper titles. Users can narrow the list of titles by state, county, or city, date range, or by using keywords. Each citation includes the title, place of publication, geographic coverage, publisher, description, frequency, language, and notes. The directory also indicates which libraries and institutions have original or microfilm copies along with a summary of their holdings.

FINDING NEWSPAPERS TODAY

Researchers typically work with three types of newspaper formats: originals, microfilm preservation copies, and digital images. While significant progress has been made in the area of digitization, the vast majority of newspapers are only accessible to the public on microfilm. Note, that most libraries and institutions limit the use of originals when a microfilm service copy exists. To locate original, microfilm, or digital image copies check the following resources and repositories:

Originals

- | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| • Family | • Newspaper Offices | • Online auction sites |
| • Libraries or | • Antique shops or | (eBay, WebStore, |
| Historical Societies | rare book stores | eBid, etc.) |

Microfilm Copies

- | | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| • Libraries or | • Newspapers in | • Family History |
| archives | Microform ⁶ | Library |
| • WorldCat ⁵ | • Genealogical or | |
| • Interlibrary loan | historical societies | |

Digital Image Copies

- CD-ROM
- Internet
- Wikipedia⁷
- Google
- Subscription Websites

Resources

⁵ **WorldCat** (<http://www.worldcat.org>) is the world's largest online library catalog. It provides access to a network of over 10,000 participating libraries. WorldCat is a valuable resource for finding newspapers or determining where those materials can be accessed. Use interlibrary loan to request far away materials.

⁶ **Newspapers in Microform: United States, 1948-1983**, 2 vols. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1984. This reference work was compiled by the Library of Congress. It is arranged geographically by state and then city. Each listing includes newspaper title, publication dates, frequency of publication, notes, repositories with significant holdings, type of microform, and collection details. A digital version of this book is available online at http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/news_research_tools/newspapersinmf.html.

⁷ **Wikipedia** (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>) users have created a helpful article entitled, "List of Online Newspaper Archives." The article contains a compiled list of links to various online digital newspaper archives of the world. Most of the newspaper websites referenced are free of charge, but the list does include some subscription based websites.

NEWSPAPERS ONLINE: FREE WEBSITES

Many states are engaged in various digital newspaper projects. Most notable is the National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP). This program is making it possible for participating institutions to not only digitize their newspaper collections published between 1836 and 1922, but to make them freely accessible to the public on the Internet. For more information about the NDNP see <http://www.loc.gov/ndnp/about.html>. Below are some examples of wonderful statewide online newspaper collections:

California	http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cdnc
Colorado	http://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org
Florida	http://ufdc.ufl.edu/fdnl
Illinois	http://www.library.illinois.edu/dnc/
Kentucky	http://kdl.kyvl.org/
Louisiana	http://louisdl.louislibraries.org/
Maryland	http://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc4800/sc4872/html/newspapers.html
Missouri	http://www.sos.mo.gov/mdh/browse.asp?id=12.6
North Carolina	http://exhibits.archives.ncdcr.gov/newspaper/index.html
Utah	http://digitalnewspapers.org
Washington	http://www.sos.wa.gov/history/newspapers.aspx
Wyoming	http://www.wyonewspapers.org/

Other Major Free Websites

Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, 1836-1922

(<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>). This website is home to one of the best free online digital newspaper collections on the Internet. Currently the site has over 9.3 million high quality digital images, over 1700 newspaper titles spanning the years 1836 to 1922, and coverage for 41 states and the District of Columbia.

FamilySearch (<http://www.familysearch.org>). This website continues to add more and more online obituary collections. Currently, they have 25 distinct collections titled with the terms "obituary," "obituaries," or "newspapers." Their most notable collection is the "United States, GenealogyBank Obituaries, 1980-2014." The collection contains over 10 million obituaries.

Google News Archive (<http://news.google.com/newspapers>). Search and explore historical newspapers dating back over 200 years. Contains search results to free and subscription based websites like the Washington Post Archives, Newspaper Archive, and New York Times Archives. Also included are materials Google has digitized as part of their News Archive Partner Program. There are nearly 2500 titles in this collection; some contain only a few issues, while others contain hundreds and thousands.

Obituaries.com (<http://www.obituaries.com>). This is a great resource for finding recent obituaries. The website serves as an index to obituaries published in over 1500 newspapers in North America, Europe and Australia. They're currently partnering with 124 of the 150 largest U.S. newspapers.

Old Fulton NY Post Cards (<http://www.fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>). Don't be fooled by the name of this website. This Internet gem provides access to over 730 New York and U.S. newspaper titles. To maximize search results and get the most from the website, users NEED to read the FAQ Help Index.

Refdesk.com (<http://www.refdesk.com/paper.html>). This is a great resource for finding current online newspapers. The website provides links to over 20,000 U.S. and worldwide newspapers, including links to many U.S. newspaper archives.

Small Town Papers (<http://www.smalltownpapers.com>). This Seattle-based company is working to digitally preserve both current and archive editions of America's small town newspapers. Currently there are nearly 300 newspaper titles in their collection, some dating back to the 1846, with coverage for 48 states.

NEWSPAPERS ONLINE: SUBSCRIPTION WEBSITES (\$)

There are several subscription websites on the Internet that offer digital newspapers access. Below is an alphabetical listing of some of the major commercial websites with notable newspaper content. Many of these subscription websites can be accessed for free* at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah.

19th Century Newspapers* (<http://www.infotrac.galegroup.com>). This is an offering of the Gale Corporation. Their databases are available only to libraries. The 19th Century Newspaper collection includes over 500 newspaper titles, 1.8 million pages, and coverage for all 50 U.S. states. Access to this database is available remotely through Godfrey Memorial Library Online (<http://www.godfrey.org>).

American Ancestors* (<http://www.americanancestors.org>). This is the official website of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. The society provides members with remote

access to 19th Century U.S. Newspapers.

Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>). They currently offer over 1300 U.S. newspaper titles totaling more than 16 million pages. In addition, they have 70 distinct obituary collections including their U.S. Obituaries collection that is comprised of over 32 million obituaries.

Find My Past* (<http://www.findmypast.com>). Their U.S. and World newspaper collection totals nearly 120 million pages. The collection covers all 50 states, District of Columbia, Panama, and the Virgin Islands and is comprised of local and national newspapers. Some of the national papers include the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Fold3* (<http://www.fold3.com>). Owned and operated by Ancestry.com. Current offerings include the *Atlanta Constitution* (1868-1914), *Chicago Tribune* (1849-1923), *London Times* (1785-1921), *San Francisco Chronicle* (1865-1923), and *Washington Post* (1904-1921). They also have some Indiana, Kentucky, and Virginia digital newspapers in their collection.

Genealogy Bank (<http://www.genealogybank.com>). Search over 6500 historical newspapers spanning the years 1690 to the present. They have coverage for all 50 U.S. states and boast a collection of over 1 billion names. They also offer an extensive obituary collection (215+ million) with dates ranging from 1977 to the present.

My Heritage* (<http://www.myheritage.com>). Their “newspaper archive” collection contains approximately 140 million pages and covers the years 1609 to the present. Unfortunately, the website does not offer a browse feature or complete list of titles, so it is not known how many historical newspaper titles are in the collection.

News Bank (<http://www.newsbank.com>). A web-based product offered to public libraries, colleges and universities, schools, government and military libraries, professionals and researchers. Their newspaper collection is comprised of over 2,000 titles and 100 million plus articles. More than 50 countries are represented in their collection. They offer a variety of collections including “Early American Newspapers (1690-1922),” “20th Century American Newspapers,” and “America’s Historical Newspapers.”

Newspaper Archive* (<http://www.newspaperarchive.com>). They provide digital access to over 7,200 newspaper titles from 1607 to the present. Their coverage includes all 50 U.S. states. Access to Newspaper Archives is also available through MyHeritage Genealogy (<http://www.myheritage.com>) and Godfrey Memorial Library Online (<http://www.godfrey.org>).

Newspapers.com (<http://www.newspapers.com>). This website officially launched in November of 2012. Their collection includes over 3500 U.S. newspapers covering 50 states and the District of Columbia. Their papers range from the 1700s to 2000s.

Obits Archive (<http://www.obitsarchive.com>). Provides access to obituaries found in over 3300 U.S. newspaper titles and with content dating back to the 1980s. The majority of the obits are post 1995. Photos of the deceased are not included. The Archive index can be searched for free. However, each obit cost \$2.95 and can be purchased with any major credit card.

ProQuest Obituaries* (<http://www.obituaries.proquest.com>). This subscription based website is available only to libraries. Current offerings include the *Atlanta Constitution* (1868-1922), *Boston Globe* (1872-1922), *Chicago Defender* (1921-1975), *Chicago Tribune* (1852-1984), *Los Angeles Times* (1881-1984), *New York Times* (1851-1994), and *Washington Post* (1877-1950).

SEARCH STRATEGIES

The following suggestions and strategies may be helpful when searching newspapers:

- Use indexes when available.⁸ Indexes may come in several forms—published books, card files, and online lists. Note: The website Elephind.com (www.elephind.com) allows users to search over 2700 newspapers found currently on 20 websites. Published transcriptions may also contain indexes. Remember, transcriptions may not always be complete or accurate. When possible verify transcriptions against the original.
- Databases created using Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software are not infallible. Characters are often ignored or misread. Try using different keyword combinations to find a person of interest. When practical, search by surname only. Keep in mind, a surname may have also been spelled a number of different ways.
- Browsing page by page can be a difficult and time consuming task. When time is a factor, consider searching specific dates or sections of the newspaper (society pages can be especially rewarding). Try searching for milestone events such as birthdays, wedding anniversaries, graduations, and retirements. Be sure to search a few days before and after the event date to ensure that nothing is missed.
- Check multiple newspapers. Noteworthy events may have been recorded in multiple newspapers. Article content may vary from paper to paper. An important detail which could help with overcoming a brick wall may have been published in one newspaper and excluded from all the rest.
- Look for clues in other records. Sometimes the information found in a record will provide a hint that one should check the newspaper for additional details. For instance, the cause of death on a death certificate may reveal that an individual died tragically. Such an event may have been reported on in the local newspaper, perhaps on the front page.

Resources

⁸ Milner, Anita Cheek. *Newspaper Indexes: A Location and Subject Guide for Researchers*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977. Although outdated, this resource still has a lot of value. Milner's book identifies unpublished newspaper indexes and card files. The book provides the name of the indexed newspaper, dates indexed, scope of the index, and repository information.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Benedict, Shelia. "Using Newspapers Effectively," *OnBoard* 9 (September 2003): 20-22.

Cook, Lisa Louise. *Everything You Need to Know About—How to Find Your Family History in Newspapers*. [S.I.]: Family Chronicle, 2012.

Sniffin, Irene G. "Newspapers as a Genealogical Resource." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 68 (September 1980): 179-186.

Szucs, Loretto Dennis, and James L. Hansen. "Newspapers." *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy*. Ed. Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking. 3rd ed. Provo, UT: Ancestry, 2006. See pages 561-601.